WIGMORE HALL

Friday 29 March 2024
7.30pm

Isabelle Faust violin
Alexander Melnikov fortepiano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Violin Sonata in E flat K481 (1785)
I. Molto allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto (con variazioni)

Violin Sonata in C K296 (1778)
I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Rondo. Allegro

Interval

Violin Sonata in C K303 (1778)
I. Adagio - Molto allegro • II. Tempo di menuetto

Violin Sonata in E flat K380 (1781)
I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto • III. Rondo. Allegro

Violin playing was the Mozart family business. In the year of Wolfgang's birth, his father Leopold had published his *Elementary Violin-School* - the definitive 18th Century violin textbook. So there was never much chance that young Wolfgang would avoid the violin, and by the time he was appointed leader of the Salzburg court orchestra in November 1770 at the age of fourteen, his own violin playing was a source of some personal pride. In 1777 he wrote to his father from Augsburg that he'd played one of his concertos and 'it went like oil. Everyone praised my beautiful pure tone'. Even during his later performing career in Vienna, when he focused almost exclusively on the keyboard, he retained his ability to write fluently and idiomatically for violin.

Mozart had composed his first sonatas for violin and keyboard before his 8th birthday, and in his adult career works of this sort proved useful – and, crucially, saleable – on numerous occasions. The early domestic piano was not a powerful instrument, so a piano sonata with an 'accompaniment' for violin added both musical colour and a further element of sociability. The works we call Mozart's violin sonatas were all conceived in these terms - as sonatas for 'piano and violin'. But Mozart transcends that convention in countless inventive ways, often in response to a specific performer or performance occasion. He once wrote that he liked an aria to fit a singer's voice 'like a well-tailored suit'; and the four sonatas in this recital are every bit as individual.

Violin Sonata in E flat K481

The domestic nature of the piano and violin sonata never inhibited Mozart's mature imagination. This sonata, dated 12 December 1785, is conceived and carried out on a grand scale: three expansive movements, beginning with a sonata-*allegro* in which piano and violin are in dialogue from the very first bar. Contemporary critics noticed its ambition: the Viennese journal *Musikalische Real-Zeitung* found the movement 'much too long'.

But the same writer enjoyed the central *Adagio* – 'full of gentle emotions, the true expression of languishing love'. The piano sings the melody first. And the finale – six variations on a steady, if quirky, original theme – ends with such a playful flourish that it's tempting to wonder what occasion and individual inspired such a masterly sonata. We know little beyond that date (in the middle of a month when Mozart was highly active in Masonic music making: he typically associated the key of E flat with Freemasonry). And that it was published by Franz Anton Hoffmeister, one of Mozart's regular creditors - whether in settlement of a debt or genuine hope of profit, it's impossible to say.

Violin Sonata in C K296

The manuscript of this sonata is dated 11 March 1778 – placing it in Mannheim, shortly before Mozart's departure for Paris, where he hoped to make his fortune but instead met with professional disappointment and personal tragedy. But there's only high spirits and courtly tenderness in this sonata, written (or so musicologist Neal Zaslaw believes) for his piano student Therese Serrarius, the 15 year old daughter (or as Wolfgang put it, 'house nymph') of Mozart's Mannheim landlord. The logical assumption is that Mozart intended to play the violin part himself.

Therese was clearly a skilled and spirited pianist, and throughout the outer movements the two instruments move together in more than usually energetic accord. The sonata would ultimately be published in Vienna in 1781 as part of a set of six issued by Artaria as Mozart's Op. 2 – and dedicated to a very different young pianist, Josepha Barbara Auernhammer, whom we'll meet presently.

Violin Sonata in C K303

Munich, 6 October 1777: 'I send my sister herewith six duets for clavicembalo and violin by Schuster, which I have often played here. They are not bad. If I stay on I shall write six myself in the same style, as they are very popular here...'. Mannheim and its allied court at Munich offered Mozart a continual stream of new musical stimuli – not least the new sonatas by the Dresden composer Joseph Schuster. Suitably impressed, and as he'd suggested to his sister Nannerl he might, Mozart duly composed six sonatas on Schuster's model while in Mannheim; and later published them as a set dedicated (in the hope of advancement, as ever) to the wife of Mannheim's ruler, the Electress of the Palatinate.

Schuster's sonatas, aimed at amateurs, were in a modest two movements, and so is this one - but the resemblance ceases there. Composed early in 1778, shortly before K296, its first movement weaves a noble *Adagio* and a bustling *Allegro* into a single, extraordinarily sophisticated sonata arc. The second movement, too, goes far beyond its brief as a minuet – Mozart's vision outstripping its model even as he assimilates it.

Violin Sonata in E flat K380

Cut to Vienna, in the summer of 1781, where the 25 year old Mozart is teaching his piano student Josepha Barbara Auernhammer – and falling slightly short in gallantry. Vienna, 27 June 1781: 'I spend almost ever day after lunch at the house of Herr von Auernhammer. The young lady of the house is hideously ugly! – her playing, however is enchanting...The situation became worse before it got better: What is more, she is sérieusement in love with me...so I was compelled to tell her the truth tactfully'.

Yet that November, when Artaria issued six of Mozart's violin sonatas, they bore a dedication to Fraulein Auernhammer. A tactful gesture to retain a lucrative pupil – or balm for a broken heart? Whatever the motivation, this sonata in E flat is one of the most expansive and assured that he had written up to this point. Its broad, frequently brilliant first movement and playful finale are ideally suited to public display; and if the gloriously expressive G minor slow movement hints at something deeper — well, we know that Wolfgang admired Josepha's playing and her sensitivity, at any rate. That might have been enough.